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SUBJECT: Partnership Prepared to Observe Elections

Ref: A) Minsk 1409 B) Minsk 1343

Classified by Ambassador George Krol for Reasons 1.4 (B,D)

11. (C) Summary: On December 20, 2005, Poloffs met with civil initiative Partnership deputy director Enira Bronitskaya to inquire about the possibility of Partnership monitoring the March 2006 presidential elections. Partnership plans to observe the electoral process, including the signature verification process, but it appears that the heightened state of political repression, the group's lack of legal status, and the sooner-than-expected election date have severely constrained the organization's ability to provide the same level of extensive and consistent election monitoring that they did for the 2004 parliamentary elections. Bronitskaya also confirmed that Partnership director Nikolai Astreiko has returned to jail to complete the remainder of his 15-day prison sentence. Meanwhile independent pollster Oleg Manaev also expressed doubt that the regime would allow independent groups to conduct exit polling. End Summary.

12. (SBU) On December 20, Pol/Econ Chief and Poloff met with civil initiative Partnership deputy director Enira Bronitskaya to find out the extent to which Partnership would be allowed to monitor the electoral process leading up to and including the March 19 presidential elections and to learn more about the recent detention by police of Partnership director Nikolai Astreiko.

Partnership Plans to Observe Elections, If Possible

13. (C) Bronitskaya told Poloffs that Partnership has every intention to observe the entire electoral procedure - from signature gathering to observing the local election commission meetings to election monitoring on Election Day. She was not sure, however, how many observers they will be able to field during the electoral process. During the signature gathering and verification stage, she expected Partnership would only be able to deploy 100-150 monitors around the country. She had no idea how many monitors would be able to observe central, district, and local election commission meetings. [Note: Bronitskaya informed Poloffs that Partnership would attempt to secure at least one spot on one of the district election commissions in order to receive information directly about the election progress. There is one Central Election Commission (CEC), around 150 district election commissions and approximately 7,000 local election commissions. End Note.]

¶4. (C) Bronitskaya estimated 3,000 observers would be on hand on Election Day. [Note: Partnership fielded 3,500 observers in the 2004 parliamentary elections. Because of GOB actions, many of these have not volunteered to observe again. They had planned to field 7,000 for the 2006 presidential elections, but government interference in their work forced them to reduce this to 5,000. Now that the elections will be held four months earlier than expected, Partnership does not think it will be able to find many new volunteers.] Given that Partnership is not a registered organization -- it never had legal status, but until October it was allowed to operate as a "civic initiative" -- Partnership volunteers must be registered as election observers through already registered organizations. Bronitskaya is not confident that the authorities will allow Partnership volunteers to gain election monitor status in this fashion.

¶5. (C) Despite the recent resolution which states that independent polling institutions must receive accreditation by a special panel of the Belarusian National Academy of Sciences in order to release polling results, Bronitskaya was still confident that Partnership would be able to release the results of its observations (ref A). They can either distribute the information through intermediaries who are registered (such as the Belarusian Language Society), pass information to journalists or simply post their results on the Internet.

¶6. (C) Pol/Econ Chief inquired about the expected level of participation in the election by the youth. Bronitskaya stated that a sizable portion of the youth are interested in change, but they prefer to display this interest by supporting a particular candidate rather than working under a non-party NGO such as Partnership. However, Bronitskaya pointed out that many of the Partnership volunteers are pensioners, as they are tired of the current political situation and have little to lose.

Exit Polling also At Risk

¶7. (C) On December 19, Econoff spoke with Oleg Manaev, director of IISEPS, about the prospects for exit polling. IISEPS was one of two local polling organization subcontracted by Baltic Gallup/IRI in October 2004 to conduct exit polling during the parliamentary elections. Manaev said IISEPS would try to conduct exit polling, but he was pessimistic that the regime would allow this activity. Since 2004 IISEPS has been stripped of its legal registration, the GOB adopted new rules to control opinion polling, and the regime made it illegal to criticize the country. In 2004, Manaev said authorities arrested or harassed about 10 percent of his interviewers. Given the new conditions, he predicted around 70 percent of them would have trouble during exit polling for the upcoming elections. Manaev added his interviewers are not dedicated opposition members, but mostly students and pensioners who work for him for extra money. As such, they are not likely to risk arrest to conduct polling. Comment: the GOB will also most likely once again use its tame organizations BRYM and ECOOM to conduct highly biased, pro-Lukashenko exit polling. In the parliamentary elections, these two groups announced the "results" of their polling, live on state television, at 1100 Election Day.

Astreiko To Finish Remainder of Prison Sentence

¶8. (U) Bronitskaya confirmed for Poloffs that Partnership Director Nikolai Astreiko is back in jail. Astreiko had only served four days out of his 15-day prison sentence for organizing an unsanctioned meeting in October before he became ill and was sent to hospital (ref B). Now that he is healthy, the GOB has brought him back to prison to serve the rest of his sentence. Bronitskaya expects that he will be released on December 27 or 28.

Comment

19. (C) Although Bronitskaya tried to keep a stiff upper lip throughout the meeting, she looked somewhat at a loss. She repeated several times that her organization somehow will observe the electoral process, but in the same breath she expressed serious doubt about the quality, consistency, and depth of their work given the organization's current circumstances. In the past Partnership has been one of Belarus' most impressive NGOs, consistently turning out better than expected results. Astreiko's recent re-arrest, plus the earlier detention of Partnership's leadership (Bronitskaya herself spent 10 days in jail) and new repressive measures by the GOB, seem to have shaken this organization.

Krol